

Historical Investigation

*To what extent was Franklin Roosevelt Responsible for
the Japanese bombing on Pearl Harbor in December 7th
1941?*

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A. Plan of Investigation

The Japanese bombing on Pearl Harbor¹ in December 7th 1941 was a turning point of the World War Two as the United States entered the war on the sides of the Allies to fight against the Axis, finally ending its isolationist policy that it had been implementing since the end of World War One. The Japanese attack was seen as an aggressive action by an imperialist country to fulfill its goals, which inevitably allowed US to join the war. However, there are other factors that could have led and allowed the Roosevelt administration to part take in the war. The aim of this investigation is to examine to if Franklin D. Roosevelt² instigated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 as an attempt to join the World War Two. Varieties of sources have been used to fully explore the question, with the main points being the US foreign policy and public opinion during the period, and the reasons behind the US involvement in the war. Lastly, the two main sources used in the investigation, a memorandum that provided steps the Roosevelt administration should take on the Japanese and a famous book that discusses an insight of the truth behind the scenes have been evaluated to establish their value as sources to historians.

B. Summary of Evidence

U.S. Foreign Policy and the Public Opinion

The United States after the First World War had been implementing an isolationist policy³, which aimed to completely isolate itself from foreign affairs and world issues to prevent US from getting dragged into the war, which is evident from the neutrality acts.⁴ “In the final Neutrality Act, Americans could not sail on ships flying the flag of a belligerent nation or trade arms with warring

¹ United States Navy deep-water naval base on the island of Hawaii

² 32nd President of the United States

³ Isolationist policy refers to America's longstanding reluctance to become involved in European alliances and wars.

⁴ Acts passed by the US congress that aimed to keep US out of another war.

nations, potential causes for U.S. entry into war.”⁵ This shows that US attempted to avoid conflict as much as possible. The public of the US believed similarly that the US should avoid another war, “many Americans had chosen isolationism to shelter their young from the horrors of another war, and believed that Roosevelt would not send their sons to fight in foreign wars.”⁶ With this mindset, US did everything to remain outside of the entanglements of problems in mainly Europe as presented from both refusal to partake in the creation of Versailles Treaty⁷ and joining of League of Nations.⁸

As communism and fascism were developing simultaneously throughout the world, the United States had to be involved in world issues to protect its democracy and appear strong to foreign countries. In addition, due to the several policies US made to the world such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928,⁹ US had to react to the world situation and keep its words. FDR wanted to involve US into the world issues, however; was unable to since the Congress and the people of US would never allow US to declare war on the Axis.¹⁰ A pre-war Gallup-poll showed that 88 percent of Americans opposed the US getting involved in a war that is in other foreign countries.¹¹ It was impossible for Roosevelt to join the war efforts and not get condemned by the public.¹² While he publically said he “would not send their sons to fight in foreign wars,”¹³ his true intentions differed. “The decision he made, in concert with his advisors, was to provoke Japan through a series of actions into an overt act: the Pearl Harbor attack.”¹⁴ FDR’s public announcement sharply contradicted with his true intentions, in which he wanted the US to be involved in the war and end the isolationism.

Background to the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor

The Pearl Harbor incident occurred as a result of several incidents. The US had been reacting to the aggressive behaviors of Japan since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1930s by cutting off

⁵ “United States non-interventionism.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_non-interventionism Wikipedia, 3 Jan. 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012

⁶ Stinnett, Robert. *Day of Deceit*. First Touchstone Edition. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

⁷ Peace treaty at the end of World War Two

⁸ Intergovernmental organization founded as a result of the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War.

⁹ World Peace Act

¹⁰ James Perloff. 2008. *Pearl Harbor: Hawaii Was Surprised; FDR Was Not*. <http://www.thenewamerican.com/history/american/574>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Morton A. Kaplan. 2000. *Why Roosevelt Wanted Japan to Attack Pearl Harbor*. Kaplan; World and I, Vol. 15

¹³ Stinnett, Robert. *Day of Deceit*. First Touchstone Edition. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

trade relations and through series of condemnations as the US opposed the Japanese expansion.¹⁵ However, as the US was still implementing its isolationist policy in the 1930s, it was unable to directly confront Japan and risking the country to a war. Roosevelt would publically state that US would not join the war in any circumstances, but privately planned the opposite.¹⁶ He sent his closest advisor Harry Hopkins to meet with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in January 1941 to reveal his true intentions. Hopkins told Churchill that “the President is determined that we [the United States and England] shall win the war together.”¹⁷ The Roosevelt’s other actions to instigate an involvement of the US in the world issues include: freezing Japanese assets in the US and ending sales of oil in response to the Japanese seize of southern French Indo-China, moving the Pacific fleet to Pear Harbor to show the power of US, closing the Panama Canal to its shipping, and sending military threatening note to Japanese ambassador were all evidences of US provocation that led the attack on Pearl Harbor.¹⁸ However, the most direct evidence of antagonisms toward Japan is the McCollum Memo that lists the steps of provoking Japan to secure an attack on Pearl Harbor.¹⁹

C. Evaluation of Sources

“Conspiracy Theory.” <http://historyrat.wordpress.com/2009/02/26/conspiracy-theory-fdr-and-pearl-harbor> The History Rat. 26 Feb. 2009. Web, 15 Feb. 2012. (McCollum Memorandum)

This memorandum is a primary source by Lieutenant Commander Arthur McCollum of the Office of Naval Intelligence to Navy Captains Walter Anderson and Dudley Knox on October 7th, 1940. Captains Anderson and Knox were two of the most trusted advisors to Roosevelt. The purpose of the source is to present Roosevelt with the steps required to secure the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The source is valuable in that it was the report from a naval commander to Roosevelt’s trusted advisors, meaning that it was likely that Roosevelt would have listened to his advisors. Further on, the memorandum was released in 1994, which emphasizes that it was important to hide it from the masses, as it would have brought many criticisms. However, the source is limited in that

¹⁵ “FDR and Pearl Harbor.” <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/cgi-bin/htsearch>. FDR Library. 9th July. 2009. Web, 15 Feb. 2012.

¹⁶ Stinnett, Robert. *Day of Deceit*. First Touchstone Edition. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

¹⁷ James Perloff. 2008. *Pearl Harbor: Hawaii Was Surprised; FDR Was Not*. <http://www.thenewamerican.com/history/american/574>

¹⁸ “FDR and Pearl Harbor.” <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/cgi-bin/htsearch>. FDR Library. 9th July. 2009. Web, 15 Feb. 2012.

¹⁹ “The McCollum Memo: The Smoking Gun of Pearl Harbor.” <http://whatreallyhappened.com/WRHARTICLES/McCollum/index.html> What Really Happened. Web, 15 Feb. 2012.

it might influence the people to think that the memorandum was what caused the Japanese attack to happen where in reality, there are other factors that contributed the war as well. In addition, although, the US had took the actions written on the memo, Roosevelt was not directly involved in the letter, which may indicate that Roosevelt was not responsible for the actions that were carried out in the memo.

Stinnett, Robert. *Day of Deceit*. First Touchstone Edition. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

The book by Robert Stinnett, who served in the United States Navy from 1942 to 1946 and earned multiple honors, asserts that the Roosevelt deliberately provoked the Japanese to attack on Pearl Harbor in December 7th 1941 in order to be involved in the World War Two. Stinnett supports his analysis by including actual primary sources that range from classified government documents to the accounts of individuals, providing valuable support and insight. Another factor that makes the source valuable is that as it was only recently first published in 2001, it shows that the topic is now more open, which suggests that people have discussed the issue. In addition, as the book is by a formal sailor, although bias maybe evident, the source is reliable, as the author is not serving for the navy anymore. However, one of the constraints of this book is that because Robert Stinnett as an individual wrote this book, its truthfulness diminishes as he could have created much of the information in the book.

D. Analysis

Roosevelt wanted the US to be involved in the war mainly to end the isolationism of the US. In order to go against and change the mindset of not only the Congress, but the public of the United States, President Roosevelt had to take extreme measures to lead the US into the World War Two. The public and the Congress regretted the US involvement in First World War, as the consequences were great that was not worth for. As a result, the foreign policy onwards was based on isolating and remaining outside the problems of Europe and other parts of the world, which was present in the isolationist policy. However, as US became the most powerful country after the First World War, avoiding foreign affairs started to become difficult as the years passed by.²⁰ In addition, due to the several policies and acts passed by the US such as the Kellogg Briand Pact, the US had to react if a country went against their policies. For instance, when Japan invaded Manchuria as a solution to improve their economic situation, US had to warn and cut off diplomatic relations with Japan as it

²⁰ Paul Johnson. 1995. *The Myth of American Isolationism – Reinterpreting the Past*.
<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/50987/paul-johnson/the-myth-of-american-isolationism-reinterpreting-the-past?page=3>

was going against the Kellogg Briand Pact.

With the public and the Congress still desiring isolation policy, Roosevelt had no solution but to implement other methods to join the war. FDR before fully concentrating on provoking Japan to become involved in the war, he attempted to be involved in the war directly through Germany as he offered numerous provocations to Germany: freezing its assets; shipping 50 destroyers to Britain; and depth-charging U-boats. However, the Germans did not retaliate as they knew that the America's entry into war would shift the balance of power against them, which happened during the First World War.²¹ As a result, US turned its focus on Japan, and as Japan had signed a treaty with Germany and Italy, a Japanese attack on US would mean that Germany and Italy would also be declaring war on US. FDR's plan to provoke Japan began with a memorandum from Lieutenant Commander Arthur H. McCollum from the Office of Naval Intelligence. In the memorandum, FDR was presented with eight actions that would lead Japan into attacking the United States.²² McCollum wrote: "If by these means Japan could be led to commit and over act of war, so much the better."²³ Some of the major steps in the memo included: completely prohibiting trade relations with Japan, support Chinese government of Chiang-Kai-Shek in all possible ways, and keep strength of the US fleet in the Pacific. FDR took the advice and implemented all eight steps and more to secure the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor from October 7th 1940 to December 7th, 1941. Although the actions of Roosevelt mainly instigated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, some other reasons for the attack lie on the intentions of Japan. The attack on Pearl Harbor was understandable considering the Japanese situation at the time. The military base in USA was a threat to Japan and their plans of conquering the Dutch East Indies, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, and the rest of South Asia. The invasion of these countries was vital for Japan to fully conquer China. As US already cut off trading relationship with Japan, Japan needed resources such as oil to completely have control over China.²⁴

²¹ James Perloff. 2008. *Pearl Harbor: Hawaii Was Surprised; FDR Was Not*.
<http://www.thenewamerican.com/history/american/574>

²² Stinnett, Robert. *Day of Deceit*. First Touchstone Edition. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

²³ A declassified memo submitted by Lieutenant Commander Arthur McCollum of the Office of Naval Intelligence to Navy Captains Walter Anderson and Dudley Knox.
<http://whatreallyhappened.com/WRHARTICLES/McCollum/index.html>

²⁴ Patrick K. Buchanan. 2000. *Why Did Japan Attack Us?* <http://www.theamericancause.org/patwhydidjapan.htm>

E. Conclusion

The foreign policy of US during the years before the Second World War, which was based on isolationism, clearly obstructed FDR to change the policies and be involved in the foreign affairs. As the public and Congress opposed FDR's desire to join the war as a means to end the isolationist policy, FDR had to resort to other methods to be involved. Although FDR would present himself as opposed to the war and appear as a supporter of isolationism, Roosevelt was completely against his words in public. As Roosevelt knew that Germany would not attack the US, Roosevelt had to provoke Japan in order for the US to fight against the Axis.²⁵ The advice given to Roosevelt and his decisions to fully carry them suggest that Roosevelt provoked the Japanese to launch an attack on Pearl Harbor. Although Japan had its own reasons to attack Pearl Harbor such as a response to the cut off oil supply from the US, the actual result of the attack can be deduced that it was mainly due to the provocation made by the Roosevelt Administration of following all eight steps provided in the McCollum Memo, which ultimately threatened Japan.

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²⁵ "FDR and Pearl Harbor." <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/cgi-bin/htsearch>. FDR Library. 9th July. 2009. Web, 15 Feb. 2012.

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